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παρθενοι to Watch Out For? Looking at Female Couples in Vase-Painting and Lyric

Meryl Altman

DePauw University, maltman@depauw.edu

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**παρθενοί to Watch Out For?
Looking at Female Couples
in Vase-Painting and Lyric**



Meryl Altman
DePauw University
CAMWS 2009



What I want to talk to you about today is



This. And my first problem is, what to call it. I can't go on referring to it as NY 06.1021.167, ARV2 908.13, Para 430. It's a red-figure kylix, it lives in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it is attributed to the Painter of Bologna, ca. 460 B.C.E., and it shows ... well, what does it show? Two young women, one holding the other by the wrist while apparently sketching some sort of argument with her free hand; one wears a sakkhos, the other has her hair caught up in a fillet. Jenifer Neils and John Oakley, in *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece* (from an exhibit at the Hood Museum) label it "A School Scene with Girls (?)" -- Gisela Richter and Lindsley Hall (1936) saw "two women or girls...one apparently being pulled forward against her will. The unwilling one is carrying a writing tablet with a string through which a stylus is stuck, so a writing lesson may be the objective (though she seems rather big for this) or perhaps she has received a letter (Beazley's suggestion)."

Now, when I first encountered this pot in the early 1980s, it was displayed at the Met in a rather dusty upstairs cabinet among many others, only the tondo was visible, and there was as far as I can recall no particular label. It caught my eye as a rather striking picture of two young women, at least one of them interested in writing, who were, or were on the point of becoming, a couple -- which happened to be on my mind at the time. What was supposed to be on my mind was a dissertation that was partly about the Hellenizing 20th century poet H.D. and her relationships with women, and I thought, hm, what a nice cover illustration that might make. This is exactly the sort of "presentist" imaginative projection scholarship warns us to be embarrassed by, whether in poets like H.D. or in our own selves. And yet, as Sandra Boehringer says, "L'identification est une forme de connaissance," identification is a way of knowing. Because a quarter century later, I

mentioned the vase to Andrew Lear, who had just written a book called *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods*, and Andrew said oh, that's the one with the courting couples of women on the back. Oh really. So we went to see, and sure enough.



NY 06.1021.167, exterior A



NY 06.1021.167, ARV2 908.13, exterior B

In the new galleries, ordinary patrons of the Museum can now see some, though not all of this, especially if they know it's there (and are committed enough to squeeze themselves into a rather contorted crouching position between the case and the wall). Here, as Richter and Hall reticently, but not inaccurately put it in the 1930s, "Six women or girls are engaged in lively conversation." What is striking now is the presence of gestures from what many scholars including Lear have shown is a recognized vocabulary of (male) pederastic courtship. In each couple one woman seems to be attempting to persuade, while the other is holding back; in the two external ones on each side, one woman is wrapped modestly in a mantle while the other is making at least part of what is coyly referred to as "the up and down gesture."

Now, Lear's discussion of iconography includes some persuasive examples of the importance of reading the what he calls the "decorative program" of a vase: "the relationship (of complement or contrast) that often exists, or seems to exist, between the images on a vase's various surfaces" (Lear and Cantarella, 27).

for instance



a kylix by Douris in the Louvre – this might seem like just a nice picture of a boy with a bunny-rabbit, until you pan out, so to speak



and see the courting couples around the interior rim; even clearer, when you look on the cup's exterior,



Red-figure kylix, Douris, *ARV*2 434.78, *Ad* 2 238, exterior

you can see a seated boy, well-wrapped up, actually being offered a hare, a classic courting gift, by an older, bearded man who is standing over him. Lear argues that the central image can be read on its own as a kind of synecdoche; as he remarks, you don't need to see the erastes to know where the hare is coming from. A similar point is made

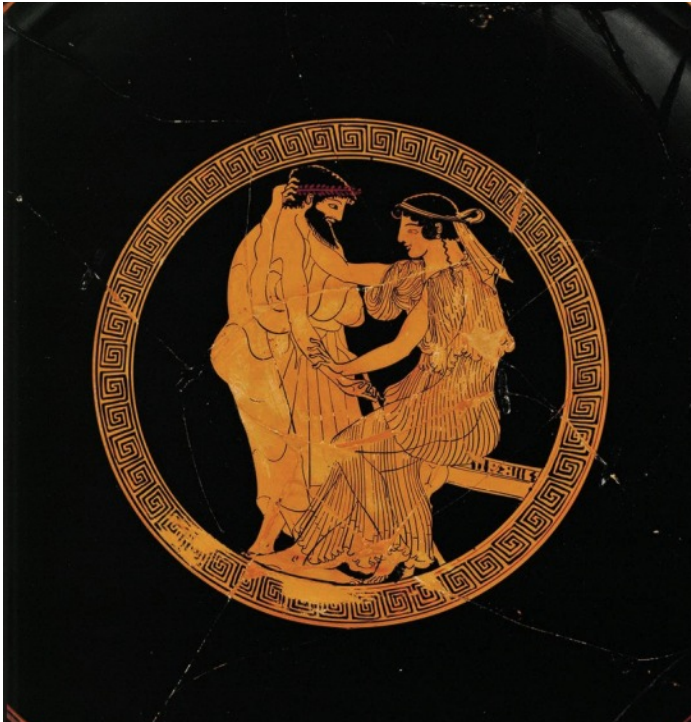
by Judith Barringer about an amphora in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.



Attic red-figure amphora of c. 500
by the Kleophrades Painter .
Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden
PC80 [18 H 35].

¹ “The idea of the victorious eromenos is again represented by a solitary, crowned eromenos holding a hare on an Attic red-figure amphora of c. 500 by the Kleophrades Painter in Leiden” (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden PC80 [18 H 35]. Judith M. Barringer, *The Hunt in Ancient Greece*, Johns Hopkins University Press.

A similar relationship between interior and exterior images can be seen with male-female couples, as in this cup in the Louvre



Red figure cup, interior; love scene
Hieron and Makron
Musée du Louvre, inv. G 143.



To return to the first kylix:



It would appear that my original naïve reading does after all have some support. And yet at least in terms of affect, my reading it appears to be somewhat idiosyncratic. Going back to Neils and Oakley, for instance – I’ve given you on the handout (see below) the full description from the exhibit catalogue, and below it, the full description from Richter in 1936. I have three thoughts about this. First, one might be permitted to wonder, along the lines of Holt Parker’s “Sappho Schoolmistress” article, whether there is really much or even any evidence that this is a school scene, or that these are “schoolgirls,” at all. (Does this vase even belong in an exhibit about “childhood” – as Richter and Hall observe, “she seems rather big for this.”)

Second, as Gloria Ferrari showed in *Figures of Speech*, arguments about who is or isn’t a hetaira can tend to be circular – “women,” that is to say citizen women, do or don’t do such and such, so if we find a picture of a woman doing something different to that, she’s not a “woman,” she’s a hetaira, or a maenad, or a mythological figure, or something. (Notice the somewhat strained wording here that “females” don’t go to school, but hetairae did, so if these females are going to school they must be hetairae—hetairae are then not, entirely, female.) That of course is how sex/gender systems work: there’s always a cultural gap between female and feminine, and the cultural work of policing that gap is, well, considerable, and often very interesting. But is the ideological work we’re seeing here happening in classical Athens, or in 20th century America?

Third, I’m not sure exactly what to say about the view that images of two women together somehow have to be a parody, or a joke – especially since that seems to hinge purely on two assumptions – first, that the *shape* of a vase exhaustively controls its

meaning, and second, that women didn't ever attend sympotic, or sympotic-type, gatherings – both assumptions that could be contested (though not fully today by me). In fact, the kylix engages seemingly every problem we have about how to understand the situation of women in Athens, and appears to vex the modern gaze with the same interpretive paradoxes that have arisen in more familiar scholarship about Sappho and Alcman.

In a longer version of this paper, I'm hoping to consider images and poems together, but one might think quickly for instance, of the wide range of interpretation of Alcman's *Partheneion*. Consider Thomas Hubbard's headnote to that poem in his anthology, where he says, "Some commentators consider it to be a female initiation rite, perhaps even a betrothal of the two girls." Then juxtapose Gloria Ferrari's stern insistence that

...the chorus's hyperbolic praise of individual members and of Hagesichora and Agido has been taken as the expression of personal erotic feelings and has prompted comparisons with Sappho and the *thiasos* over which she allegedly presided. ...That all performance fundamentally entails mines is invites scrutiny of this shaky tenet. ...Although it is performed by maidens, the *Parthenion* is not about maidens but about *kosmos*, both in the sense of political order—the constitution of the state—and in the sense of the order of the Universe.

* * *

Looking at the exterior of the vase, we see twos with a tendency to dissolve into threes, pairs that strain toward becoming triangles, as the woman with the sakkhos in the central couple looks away. I also notice that within each group of two, one woman has her head covered and the other does not; and that furthermore, while the woman taking the "lead" on the tondo was the one with her head covered, this situation was reversed on the exterior.

I would like to hear people's opinions on whether what we're looking at is seven different couples, or the same couple seven times ... but I think it can be made sense of as either, or indeed as both. We could read the exterior narratively, as a series of stages in a relationship; the variations between the two sides are slight, but the woman in the mantle becomes progressively less wrapped up, a down gesture on A becomes an up gesture on B (which makes me think side B should really be side A, but never mind). Or we could see instead of a narrative, a frieze of a variety of couples, a variety of situations in which a couple might find itself.² (These also, by the way, seem to be reasonable choices for how to read examples such as the hare, and the heterosexual love scenes shown earlier, and, a bit more complexly, for reading a Douris cup where the exterior includes a whole range of possibilities, including

² Rather neatly, an outdoor scene was represented on the inside of the pot, and vice versa.



Kylix by Douris. Side B.
Metropolitan Museum, Rogers
Fund, 1923 (23. 160.54). Lear and
Cantarella (2008) p. 134 fig. 3.19B

two women and a boy, a lonely woman, and

(detail)

a couple of women where one appears to be offering the other a necklace or a fillet.



Kylix by Douris. Side A.
Metropolitan Museum, Rogers
Fund, 1923 (23. 160.54). Lear and
Cantarella (2008) p. 134 fig. 3.19A

Returning to the tondo,



Red-figure kylix,
Metropolitan Museum,
attributed to the Bologna Painter
NY 06.1021.167, ARV2 908.13, Para 430

the way one woman is holding the other by the wrist may remind us of a conventional gesture that appears in depictions of weddings, a man “leading his bride”



Loutrophoros
Polygnotos
Royal Ontario Museum
Reeder (1995), Pandora
p. 65, fig. 6.

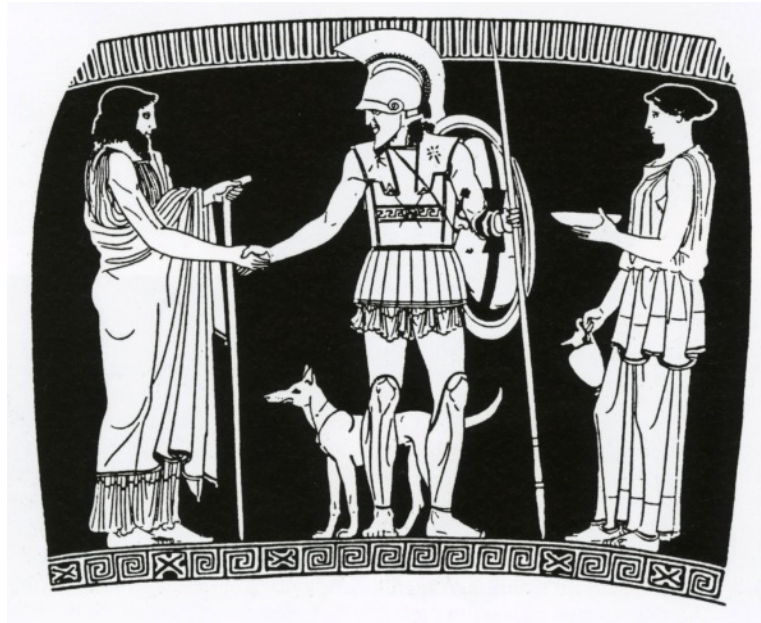


Hydria, Tyszkiewicz Painter, Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen
Pandora, p. 64 fig. 5



Red figure loutrophoros, groom leading
the bride to the bridal chamber
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts
John Oakley and Rebecca Sinos,
The Wedding in Ancient Athens
p. 110, fig. 106.

a delicate gesture that can be contrasted with the firm handclasp of a departing soldier



Vessel showing libation and leave-taking on the departure of a warrior

Claude Berard et al. (1989) *City of Images*, pg. 44, fig. 61

So, is there an analogy to the moment of marriage? Or are they holding one another by the wrist because they are involved in, or by analogy to, some sort of women's ritual? They are not dancing, but they are not entirely not dancing...



Attic white-ground phiale,
the Painter of London D12.
Boston, Museum of Fine
Arts, 65.908

Joan Breton Connelly,
Portrait of a Priestess (2007)
plate 1.

Or does the combination with the rhetorical flourish of the leading woman's other hand made this a gesture of *persuasion* – and, where other commentators have seen the second woman as “reluctant” or “unwilling,” could we see a more nuanced moment of erotic *aidos*?

What are we looking at?

It was curious to me that Sandra Boehringer omits this kylix from her comprehensive recent study, *L'Homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine*, which argues that classical vase-painting did not visually represent eroticism between women, in contrast to the literary record, to earlier vase-painting, and especially in contrast to the proliferation of red-figure male-male scenes. On the other hand, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, in “Excavating Women's Homoeroticism in Ancient Greece” (2002), does provide a sensitive and compelling reading, but she writes from a model of female eroticism that sees it as more diffuse, less hierarchical, less frankly sexual than the male pederastic paradigm. Boehringer's argument that classical vase painting does not show women together in ways conducive to male voyeurism does seem right to me, but I follow Rabinowitz in arguing that there is still something to see. My own reading sees the vase as, to quote Boehringer's view of Alcman's second Partheneion, “ni condemnation ni satire,” “neither condemnation nor satire.” If we take the vase as a whole, we can see, as in the Partheneion (PMGF 3), a repeated and conventional social structure of affective relationships within which an individual story of desire could become intelligible, could take meaning. I've given you the relevant section on the handout—you might just note the eros of the speaker attaches serially to a number of possible objects of desire – it is multiple and contextualized without being diffuse. Perhaps we could think of the kylix's tondo as lyric and the exterior as choral, and see that the two modes are not at odds, but complementary?

The kylix could also be an interesting text to engage the vexed question of whether relationships between women in the ancient world were somehow less hierarchical, less based on dominance and submission or on crude notions of “exchange,” more reciprocal, than relationships between men. With respect to Sappho, the view that would answer, “Yes,” is perhaps most strongly associated with Ellen Greene and Marilyn Skinner; my own view might be stated most simply as “no,” but a more persuasive and nuanced discussion can be found in Helene Foley's “the Mother of the Argument.”

And as in Sappho's Hymn to Aphrodite (as I read that poem), desire in the kylix appears connected to power difference, in a way that is repeatable—but reversible.

Who is it *now*, Sappho? Aphrodite is made to ask “ what I had suffered *again* and why I was calling *again*, ... whom *again* shall I persuade” to fall back in love with you (deute...deute...deute) – and the charm at the end: “For if indeed she flees, soon she will pursue,/ and though she receives not your gifts, she will give them,/ and if she love not now, soon she will love,/ even against her will.”

In Foley's word, erotic experiences in Sappho are shown, through repetition, to be *generalizable* (66).

Now, I spent some fun but fruitless weeks looking for comparanda to discover whether it was possible to distinguish two sorts of girls by headgear or age – in part seduced to that by another vase that happened to be in the same room that seemed to have the same pattern (21) – two young women listening to an older woman musician, thought perhaps to be Sappho.



Bell krater, ca. 460
B.C.; Classical; red-
figure
Attributed to the
Danae Painter
Metropolitan Museum
Roger Fund, 1923
(23.160.80)



Bell krater, attributed to the
Danae Painter
Metropolitan Museum
Rogers Fund, 1923 (23.160.80)

I wasn't able to find a broader coherent pattern. I will note though that while there are images of female couples where the two women appear to be mirror images of each other – for instance, this black-figure Amphora of “two Maenads offering a hare to Dionysus”



Two Maenads offerings a hare
to Dionysus.
Attic Black-figure neck
Amphora, Amasis Painter,
Cabinet des médailles de la
Bibliothèque National, Paris
ABV, 152.25, 687.

or the much-discussed “archaic plate from Thera, the two women courting with garlands” or “crowns.”



Archaic plate from Thera,
two women courting with garlands.
K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*
(1978). CE34*

But the red-figure couples, because of their different hair arrangements, are not mirror images, and that seems significant.

Another question raised by Foley, and discussed very compellingly by Boehringer, to which I think this kylix can contribute, is the question of whether it makes sense to analyze depictions of same sex male couples and same sex female couples together, or whether the separation of (practical and ideological) spheres between men and women was so great that it doesn't make sense to do that.

In a previous publication about the ‘new’ Sappho, I argued that while the erotic narratives described there involve power and hierarchy, the *gender* of lover and beloved was reversible and even unimportant compared with other qualities. Here too, and in general, we need to find ways to account for the possibility that men and women at times may have shared a set of tropes and a visual vocabulary about sexual and affective matters, without neglecting very real gender differences in social situation, “voice,” and power.

Now, I don't want to be one of those people that goes through life asking, like the guy in Athenaeus, “is it attested or is it not attested,” while everybody's dinner gets cold. But like Rabinowitz I remain committed to an idea that used to be called “making the invisible woman visible.” I'm not in a position to give a definitive reading of what the vase means – and I am not sure that's the right question to ask anyhow. Rather I think the

task with both pictures and poems is to try to re-construct a discursive context within which a female couple becomes culturally legible, culturally intelligible.

Of course, that is not simple even for our own culture: the last time I went to the Met I found they were selling a reproduction of this kylix as a refrigerator magnet – but just the tondo. So what are the museum members in the gift shop supposed to see and buy? What does that tell us? what does that mean?

Thank you.

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παρθενοι to Watch Out For? Looking at Female Couples in Vase-Painting and Lyric

Meryl Altman DePauw University maltman@depauw.edu
CAMWS, Minneapolis, April 3, 2009

1. Peut-être y a-t-il aussi des avantages à la fois herméneutiques et politiques à mettre en avant correspondances et rapprochements historiques. L'identification constitue un apport, et un apport non négligeable: elle fait ressortir des ressemblances, des liens, des effets d'écho. L'identification est une forme de connaissance. Elle n'a pas à être méprisée ni rejetée.

Sandra Boehringer. *L'homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine*, p. 10.

2. 46. Girls Going to School (?)

This kylix, used for wine at the all-male symposium, is decorated on the interior with a unique scene involving two tall, well-dressed females. The first, who wears a *sakkhos* (snood), **grabs the wrist of the other, who looks reluctant to come along**. The latter is holding a writing case with a stylus tucked beneath the strings, the only attribute in this scene. The exterior, which shows three pairs of conversing girls per side, has more in the way of objects hanging in the background: alabastron, wreath, sandals, writing box, fillet, and pairs of castanets.

One scholar has labeled the scene in the tondo "girl being conducted reluctantly to school." This interpretation is based on comparison with the more common scenes of boys going to school with their paidagogoi. Given the attribute carried by the girl, it is not an unreasonable reading of the scene. **Because other Attic vase paintings show women reading, one might conclude that they went to school, although no actual school scenes with girls exist. Females, if they learned to read and write, did so within the confines of the oikos.**

Only one category of women had lessons outside the house, and these were hetairae, or courtesans, who were often well educated...The castanets are traditional attributes of Greek courtesans, and so these women should probably not be identified as citizen daughters. Also, the manner in which fully draped women are paired with less covered ones on the exterior suggests a parody of male courtship scenes ... Because these scenes appear on a man's drinking vessel, they were probably intended to be humorous and entertaining rather than representative of everyday life. (Emphasis added.)

Jenifer Neils and John H. Oakley, *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past*, "Education," p. 247

3. Groups of Women or Girls.

Continuous curve from lip to foot, tolled recess on upper side of foot.

Interior: two women or girls are walking together, one apparently being pulled forward against her will. The unwilling one is carrying a writing tablet with a string through

which stylus is stuck, so a writing lesson may be the objective (though she seems rather big for this)¹ or perhaps she has received a letter.² Each wears a chiton and a himation; one has a fillet, the other a sakkos.

exterior: (A) Six women or girls are engaged in lively conversation. They are grouped in pairs, but these are interconnected, for occasionally a figure from one group looks back at another group or is moving on to the next one. All wear chitons and mantles and three have sakkoi. On the wall hang their belongings – an alabastron, a fillet, a pair of sandals (one in front, the other in profile view), a writing tablet, and a kerchief.

(B) The scene is almost identical with A. The figures are practically in the same attitudes, with style variations, gesticulating in lively fashion with one another. The paraphernalia on the wall are a round fillet, a pair of sandals (seen in profile and front view), and two pairs of castanets.

¹ For the evidence that writing and reading were included in the education of an Athenian girl, see Girard in Datenberg-Saglio. But there were apparently no schools for girls, the teaching must have been done at home. Moreover, cf Euripides *Iph in Taur* 584ff, from which we gather that Iphigeneia—a girl of a good family—could not write.

² Beazley's suggestion.

Gisela Richter and Lindsley Hall, *Red-figured Athenian Vases in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, pp. 142-32.

4. ...like 'religion' or 'ritual,' 'humor' has often proved a useful label to pin onto those objects or images from the ancient world which otherwise seem to defy explanation. If we cannot make sense of it, perhaps it was religious, or perhaps it was a joke. So the logic goes." Mary Beard, "Isn't It Funny," *New York Review of Books* July 17 2006 p. 31.

5. "...the chorus's hyperbolic praise of individual members and of Hagesichora and Agido has been taken as the expression of personal erotic feelings and has prompted comparisons with Sappho and the *thiasos* over which she allegedly presided. ...That is to say, the song would be not only sung by maidens, but first and foremost *for* and *about* maidens.

That all performance fundamentally entails mimesis invites scrutiny of this shaky tenet. Evidence that lyric choruses could, and did, play the part of mythical or epic characters is in fact both abundant and well known... the self-dramatization of the chorus, marked by the heavy use of ocular deictics, is a theatrical strategy, which calls attention to its cultic role in the performance of a rite of passage ...the Chorus of the Partheneion ...take on the role of archetypal dancers, in their case a chorus of stars... Although it is performed by maidens, the Parthenion is not about maidens but about *kosmos*, both in the sense of political order—the constitution of the state—and in the of the order of the Universe.

Gloria Ferrari, *Alcman and the Cosmos of Sparta*, pp. 17-18.

6. Why should I tell you clearly?
 Here is Hagesichora,
 But the second after Agido in beauty
 Will run as a Kolaxian horse with an Ibenian:
 For these Peleiades, rising through ambrosial 60
 Night like the star Sirius,
 While we bring the robe to Orthria,
 Fight with us.
 Neither could such an abundance
 Of purple exist as to defend us,
 Nor an intricate snake
 All gold, nor Lydian
 Headband, the delight
 Of dark-eyed girls,
 Not Nanno's hair, 70
 Nor even divine Areta,
 Not Sylacis and Clesisera;
 Nor once at Aenesimbrotas's will you say:
 "Oh that Astaphis be mine,
 May Philylla look over
 And Damareta and desired Ianthemis" --
 But Hagesichora overwhelms me.
 For isn't lovely-ankled
 Hagesichora here?
 She remains beside Agido 80
 And praises our feasts.
 O gods, receive their prayers:
 From gods come success
 And fulfillment. Chorus leader,
 85 I would speak -- myself a girl
 Screeching in vain, an owl
 From a rafter -- still I want most
 To please Aotis, since she has been
 The healer of our toils;
 But through Hagesichora young women 90
 Enter into desired peace

(Hubbard translation)

7. ... you, O Blessed Lady,
with a smile on your immortal face,
asked what I had suffered again and
why I was calling again

And what I was most wanting to happen for me
In my frenzied heart: "Whom again shall I persuade
to come back into friendship with you?
Who, O Sappho, does you injustice?"

"For if indeed she flees, soon she will pursue,
and though she receives not your gifts, she will give them,
and if she love not now, soon she will love,
even against her will."

(Jane M. Snyder trans.)

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